

# Like most Americans, Trump is ignorant of the truth about Puerto Rico



*In the past week, President Trump has been criticized for what has been seen by many as his slow response to the disaster in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria and for his comments about the costs of that disaster relief. [Lorrin Thomas](#) writes that Trump's clueless response should be seen in light of the US's historic relationship with Puerto Rico, beginning as the US's prize colonial possession in the Americas, and led to its current position as a colony facing economic crisis, a status which few Americans are aware of.*

The chief executive of the United States issued seventeen tweets about the situation in Puerto Rico on September 30. He criticized the “poor leadership” of San Juan’s mayor in the wake of Hurricane Maria’s devastation, and warned about the “fake news” that reported critically on the US disaster response. (The verifiably fake news of the day was the [rumor](#) that Puerto Rican truck drivers were refusing to transport relief goods.)

The messages were not important in themselves. President Trump’s petulance is never a surprise, nor is his tendency to fixate on the thousand little cuts his ego suffers on a daily basis. Anyone could have predicted that San Juan [Mayor Carmen Cruz](#) would get presidential blowback for registering her shock, eight days after Maria hit, over the fact that “the greatest nation in the world cannot figure out logistics for a small island.”

Trump’s string of retaliatory tweets was notable mainly in that it served, as usual, to distract from the real issues, in this case the administration’s inexcusably slow disaster response and its grave misunderstanding of the constraints Puerto Rico faces as a result of its colonial status. More on that in a moment.

On the same day as Mayor Cruz’s public plea (“I beg you to take charge and save lives. We are dying here.”), Trump’s Homeland Security Advisor Tom Bossert said the Trump administration’s coordination of the response to Hurricane Maria was “textbook, and it’s been done well.” About this assessment, Lt. General Russell Honoré, commander of the Joint Task Force Katrina in 2005, quipped, “Must be a new book. I hadn’t read that book.”

Katrina military response leader on remark about “textbook” efforts: “Must be a new book. I hadn’t read that book.” <https://t.co/ovvmVT16b1>

— CNN (@CNN) [September 29, 2017](#)

It took Trump’s cabinet seven days to decide to lift a restriction on shipping to the island territory – the now infamous [Jones Act of 1920](#) – in order for relief supplies to be brought in by ships outside the US merchant marine. It took them eight days to send in a three-star general, Lt. General Jeffrey Buchanan, to manage relief efforts on the ground in Puerto Rico. By the time federal relief workers reached many areas of the island, Puerto Ricans had been without power, without communications, without running water, and without adequate fuel to transport food, bottled water, or medicines to those who desperately needed them, for nine or ten days.

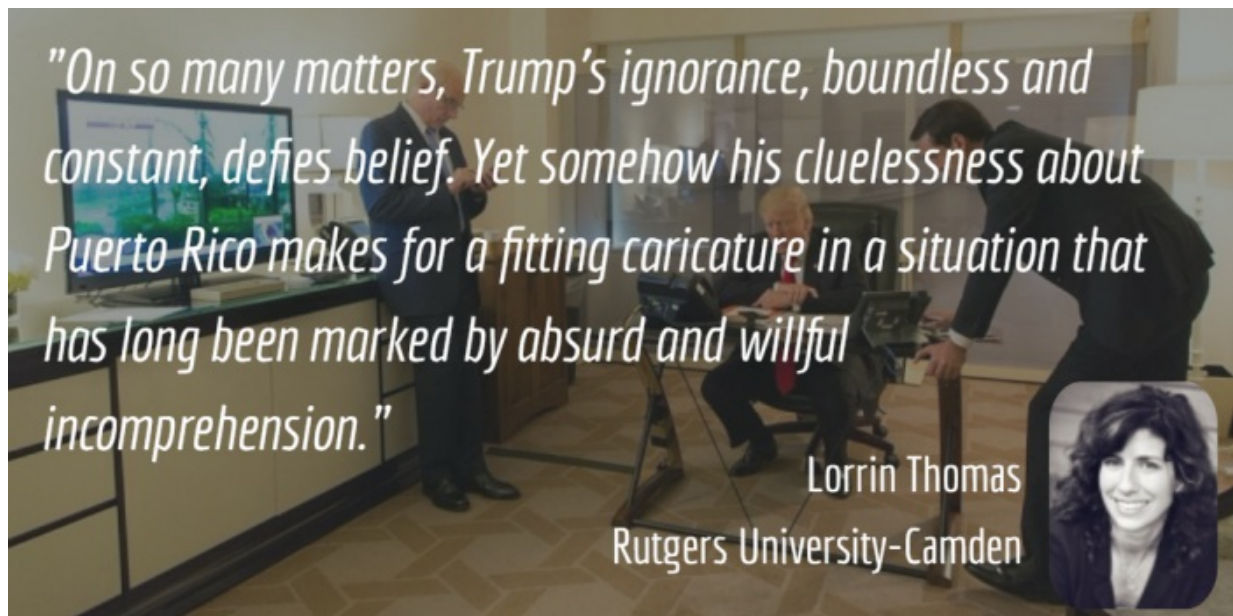
## From colonial possession to governance without representation

Few Americans have read any of the few textbooks that contain accurate information about Puerto Rico’s status vis a vis the United States, so what follows is a quick summary of the relevant history – too late to make it into a White House briefing paper, but perhaps in time to spare others the embarrassment of imperial ignorance.

Puerto Rico’s political relationship with the US originated with the United States’ victory over Spain in the Spanish-Cuban-American war of 1898. Most Americans have no idea that this war was initiated by [Puerto Rican and Cuban independence fighters](#) — think Patrick Henry and George Washington — who fought to free their respective islands, the last of Spain’s colonial possessions in the Americas, from tyrannical Spanish rule.

After Spain's defeat in 1898, Cuba was granted provisional independence by the US (Ever wonder why the US has held rights to a prime piece of property, Guantánamo Bay, in a country that was its sworn enemy for most of the last half century? That's due to a US law, the [Platt Amendment](#), passed in 1901.) Puerto Rico was smaller, had a weaker revolutionary force, and was less capable of pressing its claim for independence. It became the United States' prized colonial possession in the Americas.

Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since the passage of the [Jones-Shaforth Act in 1917](#), which concluded nearly two decades of rancorous debate in Congress over whether the constitution should "follow the flag" – which is to say, whether the protections and privileges of US citizenship must be granted to those whose territory was controlled by the United States, with or without its residents' consent. Until the 1917 law settled the matter, the prospect of conferring of US citizenship on the island was controversial among US lawmakers primarily because most rejected opening their nation to the "semi-civilized" people and "alien races" of Puerto Rico. During a time when *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) lionized the Ku Klux Klan and premiered to packed auditoriums around the country, such phrases and much worse were regularly recorded in the transcripts of congressional debate.



**President Donald J. Trump, Chief of Staff General John Kelly, and White House Homeland Security Adviser Tom Bossert speak with FEMA Administrator Brock Long regarding Hurricane Maria's impact on Puerto Rico | September 20, 2017 (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)**

A few years later, the Jones Act of 1920 was authored by a different Jones, Rep. Wesley Jones of Washington (the 1917 Jones Act was sponsored by William Jones of Virginia), with the goal of protecting the US merchant marine from competition by foreign ships. Although this second Jones Act was not primarily concerned with US imperial possessions, its secondary effect was to tighten control of commerce in and out of Puerto Rico, further constraining its economy.

Together, the two Jones Acts represent the double bind of Puerto Ricans' relationship to the US. Tied to the US by the permanence of US citizenship, Puerto Rican islanders nevertheless cannot vote in federal elections and have no proportional representation in Congress. The island's single elected Resident Commissioner can vote in Congressional committee but can't cast final votes on the House floor. When Senator John McCain proposed amendments to [repeal the 1920 Jones Act](#) in 2010, 2015, and 2016, citing its obsolescence and hindrance to free trade, the Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner was unable to cast a vote in support of the island's economic interests.

A common justification for Puerto Ricans' lack of equal representation in Congress is their exemption from federal taxes. But this is inaccurate. Puerto Ricans don't pay personal federal income taxes – they pay a hefty income tax to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico instead — but they do pay other [federal taxes](#), including social security, Medicare, commodity taxes, and import and export taxes.

Puerto Ricans bear a greater burden than taxation without representation. They are also subject to the US military draft. American citizenship was imposed on Puerto Ricans [without their consent](#) just two months before the passage of the Selective Service Act of 1917, and at least 15,000 of them fought during the First World War. For a hundred years thereafter, Puerto Rican islanders have [served in the US military](#) – and thousands have died doing so — without a representative in Congress to vote for or against declarations of war.

## The truth about Puerto Rico

Before facing the crisis of two major hurricanes in three weeks, Puerto Ricans were already grappling with an extended economic crisis that could have been staunched years ago were it not for Puerto Rico's [exclusion from US bankruptcy law](#). According to [Noah Feldman](#), a professor of constitutional and international law at Harvard, Puerto Rico is “treated as a state in every regard except bankruptcy law, and it can't change its bankruptcy law because it's not a state” – that is, because it has no true representation in Congress.

When Donald Trump finally visited the island on October 3, he congratulated Puerto Ricans on maintaining a body count lower than that of “a real catastrophe like Katrina.” He also ribbed them in his paternalistic way about the cost of disaster relief: “Hate to tell you, Puerto Rico, but you've thrown our budget a little out of whack... because we've spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico and that's fine.” Never mind that that the reverse is more true: colonial oppression, including extraction of the island's resources and human capital, has been throwing Puerto Rico's budget out of whack for over a century. Trump was just trying to be friendly.

On so many matters, Trump's ignorance, boundless and constant, defies belief. Yet somehow his cluelessness about Puerto Rico makes for a fitting caricature in a situation that has long been marked by absurd and willful incomprehension. Puerto Rico is a United States colony, and few Americans know this. It has been governed since 1898 with disregard and a false commitment to equality by the United States, the world's standard-bearer of liberty and democracy. It is said that Colombian writer and Nobel laureate [Gabriel García Márquez](#), while [visiting Puerto Rico](#) in the mid-1990s, was asked by a reporter why he had never written about the island, and replied, “If I told the truth about Puerto Rico, everyone would say I was making it up.”

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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